

Do We Make Too Much of Paul?

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Sometimes those who do not fully understand “*the preaching of Jesus Christ according to the revelation of the mystery*” wonder whether or not we give undue prominence to the Apostle Paul. Isn’t Christ our pattern, and shouldn’t we walk in His footsteps? By emphasizing Paul and the special message committed to his trust, are we casting a shadow on the Lord Jesus Christ?

In considering these objections we should be careful to notice Paul’s words in I Timothy 1:13-16. Here he presents himself as a great sinner – “*a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious,*” yea, the “*chief*” of sinners – while presenting Christ as a great Savior:

And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief.

A SINNER AND A SAVIOR

What a marvelous combination: a great sinner and a great Savior! It is with this in mind that the apostle goes on to say,

Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on Him to life everlasting.

When we think it through, it soon becomes apparent that the Lord Jesus Christ could not be the example and pattern. He did not need to be saved – indeed, His perfect, sinless life only shows up our imperfections.

The chief of sinners, saved by grace, however, makes a fitting pattern for us, for as we take our place with him and trust in the Savior Who died for our sins: “... *we have redemption through [Christ’s] blood*” (Ephesians 1:7).

Paul is the only man in the Bible, apart from our Lord Himself, who says again and again, “*Follow me.*” This is not because he was anything in himself, but because Christ had given him the message of grace and had made him the pattern for this age of grace. This is not a question of personal excellence, but of divine revelation and God-given authority and position. Note his words carefully:

For I speak to you Gentiles, inasmuch as I am the apostle of the Gentiles; I magnify mine office (Romans 11:13).

Paul, an apostle (not of men, neither by man, but by Jesus Christ, and God the Father, Who raised Him from the dead (Galatians 1:1).

For this cause I Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ for you Gentiles, if ye have heard of the dispensation of the grace of God which is given me to you-ward: How that by revelation He made known unto me the mystery ... (Ephesians 3:1-3).

PAUL AND CHRIST

A key passage in properly understanding the relationship between our Lord’s earthly ministry and that later committed to Paul is Romans 15:8-12. It begins with this declaration:

Now I say that Jesus Christ was a minister of the circumcision for the truth of God, to confirm the promises made unto the fathers (:8).

The next few verses contain the words “*and again ... and again ... and again,*” referring to the prophetic promises that one day the Gentiles would “*rejoice ... with His people*” Israel, as they with Christ as King “*reign over the Gentiles.*” The prophets had often predicted that the blessing of God would go to the Gentiles through the rise of redeemed Israel to Kingdom glory (e.g. Isaiah 60:1-3; Zechariah 8:13, 20-23). Hence Paul, here in Romans 15, quotes no less than four direct references to this glad day of millennial blessings; for this was the clear focus of our Lord’s earthly ministry.

We know, however, that “*His Own received Him not*” at His first appearing (John 1:11), declaring, “*We have no king but Caesar,*” and demanding His crucifixion.

After His resurrection the Lord commissioned His apostles to offer again repentance to Israel, and Peter thus proclaimed,

Ye are the children of the prophets, and of the covenant which God made with our fathers, saying unto Abraham, “And in thy seed shall all the kindreds of the earth be blessed.” Unto you first God, having raised up His Son Jesus, sent Him to bless you, in turning away every one of you from his iniquities (Acts 3:25-26).

Yet again they rejected Him. Thus Paul continues in his declaration to the Romans:

Nevertheless, brethren, I have written the more boldly unto you in some sort, as putting

you in mind, because of the grace that is given to me of God, that I should be the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles, ministering the gospel of God, that the offering up of the Gentiles might be acceptable, being sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Romans 15:15-16).

Here we have God sending salvation to the Gentiles – not in the manner predicted by the prophets, to be sure, but sending it nonetheless. Indeed, salvation now is going to the Gentiles through the fall of Israel:

I say then, Have they stumbled that they should fall? God forbid: but rather through their fall salvation is come unto the Gentiles, for to provoke them to jealousy (Romans 11:11).

From His ascended position in heaven the Lord Jesus Christ poured out His grace to a rebellious world by saving the very leader of their rebellion and sending him forth as both the herald and the living demonstration of His grace. Hence Paul, now “*the minister of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles,*” could proclaim,

I certify you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached of me is not after man. For I neither received it of man, neither was I taught it, but by the revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11-12).

This was no afterthought on God’s part, no makeshift arrangement, for the Apostle adds that God has,

separated me from my mother’s womb, and called me by His grace, to reveal His Son in me (:15-16).

Today Jesus Christ is revealing Himself to the world through the writings of the Apostle Paul. Paul was in Christ and Christ was in Paul. The Lord first revealed Himself to Paul, and then through Paul to the world.

Those who continue to pit “the words of Paul” against “the words of Christ,” should carefully consider the Word of God in I Timothy 6:3-4:

If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ, and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; he is proud, knowing nothing, but doting about questions and strifes of words ...

It is hard to imagine how he could more emphatically set forth the truth that his words were in fact the words of Christ. He again insists upon this in his stern rebuke to the carnal Corinthians.

If I come again I will not spare, since ye seek a proof of Christ speaking in me (II Corinthians 13:2-3).

Thus our ascended, glorified Lord is now sending a message of love and grace to a world of sinners, through the chief of sinners, Paul, “*saved by grace*” – a message committed to him by special revelation (Galatians 11:11-12; Titus 1:3; I Corinthians 14:37).

PAUL AND THE TWELVE

The evidence is overwhelming that Paul was not one of the Twelve.

First, he never qualified for this position. Acts 1:20-22 clearly states that Judas' successor must be one who had "*companied with [the Twelve] all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among [them], beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that He was taken up from [them]*" (c.f. Matthew 19:28; John 15:27). Thus Paul's name never could have been put "on the ballot."

Neither was Paul given the same commission as the Twelve. A comparison between Christ's instructions that the Twelve "*go baptizing*" (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16) and Paul's statement, "*Christ sent me not to baptize*" (I Corinthians 1:17) easily demonstrates the point. Also, the Twelve were sent forth to teach "*all things whatsoever I have commanded you*" (Matthew 28:20) – which clearly included the faithful observance of the Law (Matthew 5:19; 23:1-3), while Paul later proclaimed Christ as "*the end of the law*" and says, "*Ye are become dead to the law by the body of Christ ... For ye are not under the law, but under grace*" (Romans 10:4; 7:4; 6:14). No, Paul is never to be considered as one of the Twelve Apostles.

As if the obvious contrasts above were not enough, notice the inspired reference to "*the Twelve*," at a time when numerically there were only eleven: "*And that He was seen of Cephas, then of the twelve*" (I Corinthians 15:5).

This inspired reference to "*the Twelve*" between the resurrection and ascension of Christ is irrefutable evidence that Matthias is one of the twelve Apostles. This is further confirmed by the fact that when Matthias was added, they were "*all filled with the Holy Ghost*" (Acts 1:26; 2:4).

Further, Paul and the Twelve represented different programs. Not only is the number 12 associated particularly with Israel, but we are told that the Twelve Apostles were her official representatives, destined to "*sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel*" (Matthew 19:28; Luke 22:28-30). Paul, on the other hand, was by birth both a Hebrew and a Roman (Acts 16:37; 22:28), and thus an appropriate representative of the "*one Body*" composed of reconciled Jews and Gentiles.

Again, Paul and the Twelve proclaimed different messages. The very heart of the message of the Twelve was the establishment of Messiah's kingdom on earth, while in Paul's message the kingdom program awaits a future day, having been interrupted. Today everything centers in God's grace to a Christ-rejecting world, as He reconciles believing Jews and Gentiles to Himself in one Body, giving them a position in heavenly places with Him.

Aside from this – and much more could be said –is how those who insist on following Peter and the Twelve never come to grips with the following:

And when James, Cephas and John, who seemed to be pillars, perceived the grace that was given unto me [Paul], they gave to me and Barnabas the right hands of fellowship;

that we should go unto the heathen, and they unto the circumcision (Galatians 2:9).

How could the record here in Galatians 2 be clearer? James, Peter and John, along with the whole Jerusalem church, recognize the further revelation given through Paul and take part in a public act of recognition and endorsement of the fact that God had now appointed Paul as the Apostle of the Gentiles.¹ If Peter's present-day admirers would ask him, he (and the Twelve) would tell them, "Follow Paul: he is God's spokesman for the present day."

PAUL AND US

Just as our ascended Lord, so to speak, says, "Follow Paul, I have revealed Myself to you through him;" just as the Twelve say, "Follow Paul, he is God's appointed spokesman for the dispensation of grace;" so Paul himself exhorts us by divine inspiration,

Be ye followers of me, even as I am also of Christ (I Corinthians 11:1).

While we firmly believe and contend that "*all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable*" (II Timothy 3:16), we also recognize that we can obtain the profit God has placed for us in His Word only when we "*rightly divide the Word of truth*" (II Timothy 2:15). Frankly put, we need those divine instructions which are appropriate to the age in which we live. The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount simply will not do, for who among us is sufficient to keep them?

The next time you hear the so-called "Lord's Prayer" recited, *think* for a moment: Are we to be praying, "*Thy kingdom come?*" Are we not going to be with Christ, rather than waiting for Him to come to earth to reign? Would God have us twist and misapply this important passage into a mindless and meaningless ritual?

Neither does the Pentecostal program provide an adequate basis upon which to operate today. Its legalism, baptismal salvation, signs and wonders, "*all things common,*" Jerusalem first and apostolic powers to remit sins are only some of the things which produce confusion when attempted today.

No. It is not until we turn to the epistles of Paul that we find instructions appropriate to the age in which we live. It is Paul who has so much to say about salvation by grace through faith, about the spiritual life and walk of the believer and how to achieve a walk that will truly glorify God. It is Paul who tells us how to function as members of the body of Christ. Indeed, he is our apostle – God's spokesman – for the dispensation in which we live.

HEAR HIM

When Peter, on the Mount of Transfiguration, started talking simply because "*he wist not what to say,*" God interrupted him, saying, "*This is My beloved Son; hear ye Him*" (Mark 9:7; Matthew 17:5). Yet now, from heaven's glory, our Lord Himself says, so to speak, "I have saved the chief of sinners by My grace, and have given him to you, My representative, a living

1. C.f. Peter's own inspired explanation of the delay in the completion of the prophetic program in II Peter 3:3-16.

example and pattern of My grace to you: *Hear ye him.*” Thus in hearing him, we are then giving heed to our risen, glorified Lord (John 13:20).

The Twelve echo in tune: “God has interrupted the prophesied program and has given a further revelation through Paul; we commend you to him – *hear ye him.*”

Paul himself adds:

In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began, but hath in due times manifested His Word through preaching, which is committed unto me according to the commandment of God our Savior (Titus 1:2-3).

[Christ] gave Himself a ransom for all, to be testified in due time, whereunto I am ordained a preacher, and an apostle ... a teacher of the Gentiles, in faith and verity (I Timothy 2:6-7).

What a glorious message Christ has sent down from heaven – for us today – a message that makes Him everything! Rather than giving undue prominence to the Apostle Paul, as we recognize His unique position of God-given authority and its importance for us today, we are in fact being faithful to our God-given message. God has put a high premium on faithful obedience to His Word. By His grace may we refuse the wine of the religious system and its attempts to draw us away from the path of obedience to God’s particular word to us.

The Grace Journal
Volume 12, Number 3

Taken from the *Bible Student’s Notebook*[™], a weekly Bible study publication available in two formats (electronic and printed)

www.BibleStudentsNotebook.com

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